

BLISSBURG MEMORIES

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Back in the old days, Blissburg was just the spot for a nice vacation. Why, a fellow could make a vacation of his whole life there if he felt like it. Not that you could get by without ever lifting a finger to support yourself or anything, but what little work there was came naturally. What I mean is that mostly you just took care of yourself. Take me, for instance: I'm a rabbit. Now we rabbits jive on carrots, and cabbage, and all that sort. So the *natural* thing to do was for us to go out and pick our own food. I never asked the woodpecker to gnaw off a piece of tender bark for me, and he never asked me to drill for termites in the limbs of a rotten birch. No doubt about it, we all got along famously. There wasn't much intermarriage, granted, but that wasn't much of an issue back then. The birds didn't mind their ghetto in the treetops, and we rabbits didn't mind our basement tenements. It all seemed natural enough.

We weren't anti-social, though. I didn't mean to imply that. As a matter of fact, we even had a meeting hall. But there were certainly a few problems in building it. We found out early that it wasn't much use trying to get a bluejay and a turtle to agree on how high the chairs ought to be, so we decided it would be best to have interior furnishings of a versatile mode. Finally, we established a committee. After a few months or so of deliberations, it was obvious that the squirrels wanted a hickorynut tree in the hall; the frogs wanted a spring; the birds wanted their own private entrance through the ceiling; and the turtles wanted conveyor belts running in all directions. Well, the idea struck them all at once that they already *had* the closest thing to their ideal meeting hall: it was the very spot where they were. Nature itself had provided them with a pair of healthy hickorynut trees, a clear little spring, and versatile interior furnishings; the birds had their private entrance because no one else could come in by the air anyway. Only the turtles were dissatisfied, but it was easy enough to ignore them: besides, who ever heard of conveyor belts in a forest? It took a lot of effort, but we finally had a meeting hall.

The odd thing was that we couldn't think of any community issues that should be brought up in the hall. The only group that ever wrote up a grievance was the turtles: they were still trying to get their free

rides. Like I said, nobody paid much attention to the turtles, so the meeting hall just became a sort of party place. On Friday night, everybody would go there to have a good time. The chipmunks went out collecting sunflower seeds for all their friends—not that they were civil servants, mind you: with all their excess energy, they just liked the idea of having something to do. Sometimes they brought in a few poppy seeds, but nobody ever got hooked on them. Now we rabbits couldn't groove with all those seed-heads, so we always kept a few kegs of fermented vegetable juice on hand. It wasn't too good for our livers, though. Anyway, those parties were really fab. The birds, and the squirrels, and the chipmunks all got stoned on the seeds; and the field mice, and the groundhogs, and we rabbits got equally zonked on the carrot juice. Now the frogs were normally pretty straight, but once the party started swinging they'd dive to the bottom of their pool and wipe out on some weird type of moss that grew there. That left only the turtles with nothing to do themselves up with. The frogs were the only ones who liked the algae; our vegetable squeezings had too much odor for the others; and the chipmunks wouldn't share their seeds with any holier-than-thou turtles who were always complaining about not having conveyor belts. The turtles couldn't find any uppers, downers, hallucinogens, or mind-blowers on their own, so they tried hyperventilating whenever they found themselves left out of the fun. The problem was that they just got sick and threw up every time they did that; then they were even more crabby than they had been. But one day, a turtle had just begun to hyperventilate, his neck bent straight up and his open mouth drawing deep breaths, when one of the birds—a partridge if I remember right—sitting on a tree limb had a fit of diarrhea brought on by too many poppy seeds. Well, at any rate, the turtles finally found something that they could really groove on. For a while there, we had true brotherhood. It turned out that the turtles were okay guys once they let their hair down and got with it.

The community fared rather well for the next few months. We got it together every Friday for an all-night blast, and then each of us went his own way. The parties might have been a little over-indulgent at times, but that was only once a week: things were still pretty natural. The trouble came one day when this Reynard fellow came around. He claimed he lived in the next valley, but he always looked

like some sort of foreigner to me. Anyway, this Reynard was a rare bird if I ever saw one. Said he was some sort of financial speculator; he was interested in buying some of our local minerals. We didn't know anything about finances or mineral resources and really had no idea of what to say to him. Since there wasn't even anyone of us animals who could speak with authority for the whole town, we decided to have a meeting to figure out what to do about Reynard. It just so happened that we called the meeting for a Friday evening. Now most of us knew that there was an important order of business at hand, but the chipmunks went ahead and collected their sunflower seeds and were half-stoned when they arrived. While some of us were trying to talk sense to them, the birds started picking up stray seeds; the frogs dove to the bottom of the pool; and a groundhog, who had just come off the wagon for the ninth time, brought in a barrel of 90 proof carrot juice. The turtles couldn't seem to wait until the birds had manufactured some liquid sunflower power for them, so they started hyperventilating again. After a while, the whole house was smashed, and everybody had forgotten about Reynard and the mineral business. Before the night was over, the turtles were performing like professional outfielders, and one of them started joking about the conveyor belts. He was only joking, because the whole idea had been forgotten after the turtles started joining in the community spirit every Friday night. But this Reynard overheard what was said and put two and two together.

Well, the next day nobody saw Reynard around. We all figured that he just got mad and left because we had ignored him the night before. Actually, he decided after the party that he would have a better chance by negotiating with a smaller group. And since he figured that the turtles wanted something—the conveyor belts—he thought he could bargain easiest with them. Well, Fat Jack was more or less the opinion leader of the turtle clan, so Reynard went to see him. At first Jack told him that he didn't want to have anything to do with shady deals behind everyone's back, but Reynard was a sly one, all-right. Reynard told Jack and the other turtles that everybody laughed at them because they threw up when they hyperventilated and had to catch bird droppings to get a decent high. He said that all the others had a good time just because they were making fun of the turtles. Now Fat Jack had always been a little self-conscious, and the thought that

the other citizens made fun of him turned out to be the last straw. He vowed to be a complete straight so that nobody would mock him anymore. And just when he was in that real crabby mood, Reynard asked if he'd like to have some conveyor belts with electric motors, lever controls, and guaranteed jet-smooth ride. It was an impulsive decision, but Fat Jack and the other turtles signed some secret agreement with Reynard before anyone found out what was going on.

Within a week, all of Reynard's brothers, cousins, and in-laws had come into town with pre-fabricated conveyor belts, and the turtles suddenly were the most mobile guys around. Little by little, all of us other animals asked if we could take a test hop on one of the conveyors; the turtles were happy enough to give us rides whenever we wanted one. This went on until the birds got out of the habit of flying; we rabbits forgot how to hop; and the frogs could barely move without help. The chipmunks, being always zonked on sunflowers and poppies, were the only group that kept away from the conveyors: they were mainly just too wiped out to find them. But anyway, the turtles said one day that they were going on strike. "Strike?" That was a new word to us. We found out that the turtles, the only ones who knew how to operate the levers and toggle switches controlling the conveyors, simply refused to do anything. And they wouldn't tell us why either. We all sat there by the conveyor belts, sort of stunned and not knowing what to do. Then Reynard came back, and the conspiracy was revealed. He told us that we had to agree to let him mine all the coal and iron ore out of our forest, or he'd let us starve to death by the cursed trans-forest conveyors. Whatsmore, soon as we got our strength back, we had to work in the mines and factories. But he promised we'd get pay for it. "Pay?" That was another new word, but it sounded better than starvation.

It took a long program of rehabilitation and training, but our spirits were broken, and we offered no resistance. We were finally transformed into an organized working force. We rabbits blew air into the blast furnace; the birds pulled carts up the mine shafts; the mice became blasting experts; and the turtles supervised and played with their conveyor belts. The plan worked out allright, I suppose, but it was a far cry from being *natural*. We rabbits still couldn't hop, but our lungs got to be something special; the birds were the best walkers of the group, but they were always too tired by the end of the

shift to take a single step. At any rate, we kept using the conveyors for simple transportation. Now the *money* added a whole new dimension to things. We felt so good after getting paid on Friday, that somebody suggested we start having parties again. So one payday we all took the escalator to the conveyor system and rode to the old meeting hall. Things had changed a little. That is, the trees had died and fallen down, and the spring was covered with an oil slick. But that was okay. No one could climb up or fly to a tree limb anymore, and the frogs had forgotten how to swim at their desk jobs. Then we realized that there wasn't anything to do for kicks. There weren't any sunflower seeds; the algae in the spring had died; and we rabbits, so used to having our food catered, forgot how to find the vegetable patch. And we had all that money, too, with no way to spend it. What a hummer! But the chipmunks came to the rescue. They were all wearing imported sharkskin suits, patent leather boots, and dark glasses: not very natural to see a chipmunk dolled up like that. They brought their poppy seeds in by the bushel, but they were *selling* the stuff instead of giving it away. The foxes had talked to them, too.

In a couple of years, the coal supply dwindled; the foxes were gone all of a sudden one morning before breakfast. Then we found out they had taken the batteries for the conveyor belts with them. We were in more trouble than we realized. Luckily, the white-collar frogs and the junior executive turtles put their heads together and devised a plan. The birds pushed us rabbits until we could use our legs again, and we blew up such a storm that the birds couldn't help but fly. Gradually, we cleared off the oil slicks; planted new trees; gave chewing lessons to the mice; and gave diving lessons to the frogs. The parties began again just the way they had been in the old days. The only difference was that the turtles went back to hyperventilating: they still thought we made fun of them when they took their sunflower seeds second-hand during our Friday night happy hours.

And that's the way things were back in the old country when I was a boy. I may have a touch of cirrhosis of the liver now, but it sure as hell beats the day shift in a steel mill!

